

Pioneer relations with Indians on trek were mostly peaceful

By Michael Perkins
Deseret News staff writer

Mormon pioneers enjoyed good relations with Indian tribes during the migration to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century, although some fighting did take place along the trail, historian Stanley B. Kimball told a gathering of Sons of the Utah Pioneers Wednesday night.

Most encounters between pioneers and Indians were peaceful, some were benevolent, and some were even humorous, said Kimball, a history professor at Southern Illinois University and an expert on Mormon trails used during the westward migration.

The Indians regularly offered to trade their ponies to the Mormon men for their white women. Kimball said redheaded women wearing their hair in ringlets were especially attractive to the Indians because they liked to pull the ringlets and see them spring back into place.

One redheaded teenager had to hide beneath feather beds while a particularly persistent Indian chief searched all the wagons in the train to find her. After her mother told the chief she was lost, he left promising to find her and return her. He never came back.

Kimball said some of the Mormon men foolishly kidded the Indians that they could have the Mormon women in exchange for a pony. When the braves returned with a horse to trade for a wife, the men were forced to extract themselves from a deal the Indians had taken very seriously.

Frequently the Indians also promised to buy the children of the woman they wanted to acquire in trade. Kimball said the Indians considered it the proper and humanitarian thing to do.

Although the Indians expressed a definite interest in the white women, there was only one verified case where a Mormon woman was kidnapped and never returned by

Indians during the westward migration.

Despite the generally peaceful relations with the Indians, the pioneers remained on guard whenever an Indian came around their camps. Kimball told of one time when the Mormons suspected a certain brave of spying. They dusted a freckle-faced boy with flour to make him look like a corpse that had died from smallpox. They laid him between two white sheets and when the Indian saw him he ran away, Kimball said.

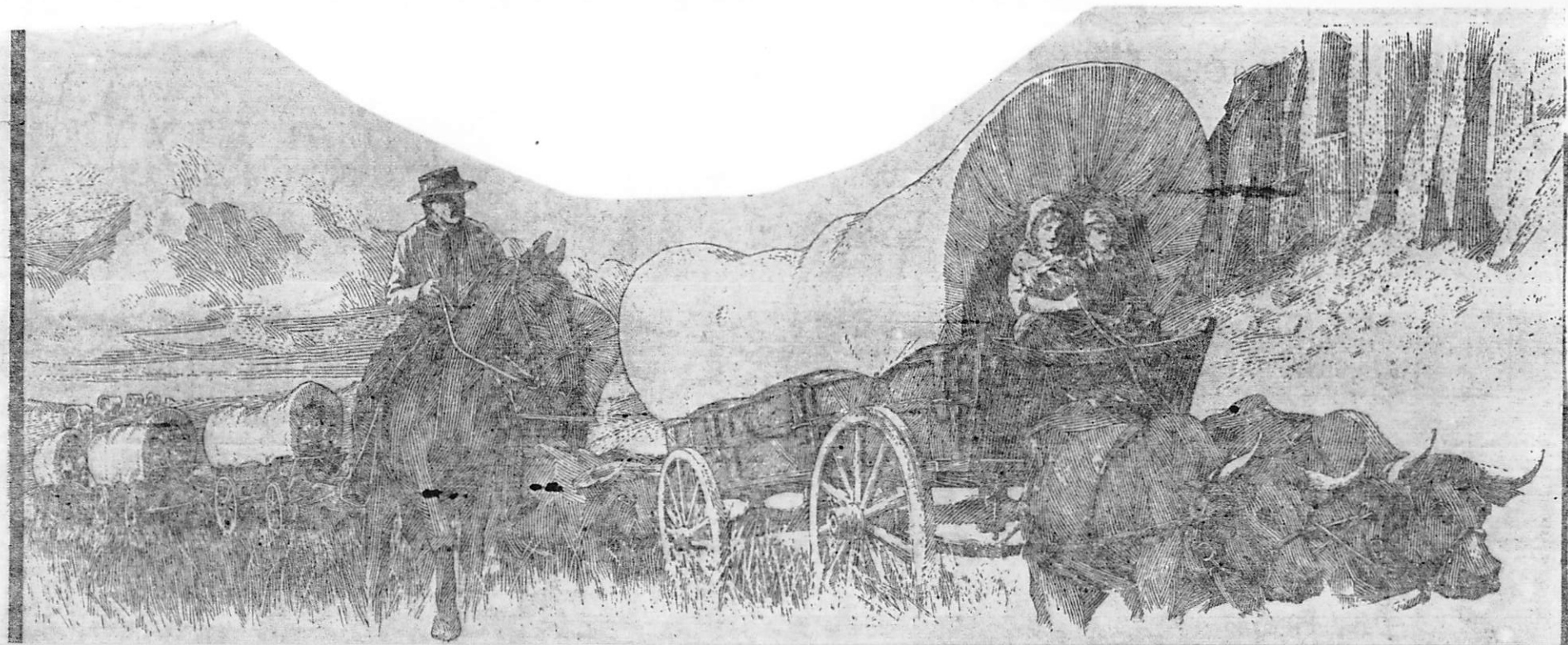
Kimball said the Indians occasionally took care of lost Mormon pioneers who were separated from their companies. On the trails west of the Missouri River, the Indians frequently helped pioneers push their handcarts.

Kimball told a story about a 73-year-old woman who became separated from her handcart company. After she wandered into an Indian encampment, the Indians fed her, helped her ford a river with her handcart and put her

on the right trail heading west. She was later reunited with her company after traveling alone for three days, Kimball said.

Indian violence against pioneers broke out in the early 1860s when the U.S. government's Indian troops were called back to fight in the Civil War. Kimball said the native Americans struck back to reclaim their land, which pioneers had begun to occupy instead of just travel across. Despite Hollywood myths, though, he said few immigrants were actually killed while crossing the plains. An average of 18 whites were killed a year by Indians between 1840 and 1860, and tales of massacres were mostly rumors.

Contrary to Mormon folklore, Mormon pioneers did not blaze trails across the Great Plains, Kimball said. They were too concerned with making their difficult job as easy as possible to worry about earning a place in history books by cutting new trails to the West, he said.





The buffalo once again roams freely at Montana's National Bison Range.



The American bison, up close and personal.

MONTANA'S NATIONAL BISON RANGE

OH GIVE ME A HOME,
WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM



STORY AND PHOTOS BY
FRANK JENSEN

The American bison, commonly called the buffalo, is the largest American land animal and one of unpredictable temperament.

A fully mature bull is a massive animal standing six feet at the shoulder, perhaps 10 feet from muzzle to rump, and will weigh just short of a ton. In rut it is afflicted with a mindless fury.

So naturally I felt a certain unease when a band I had been photographing wandered off a hillside and into our immediate vicinity, blocking the road ahead.

They were part of a larger herd of 400 bison, which roam Montana's National Bison Range — a 19,000-acre reserve in the Flathead Valley, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Earlier, my wife and I had stopped at the visitors center where we were sup-

plied with brochures and given the option of two self-guiding tours.

One was a 20-minute loop adjacent to the museum, known as the Buffalo Prairie Drive. On this drive, bison and elk can be seen in enclosures, or so-called demonstration areas.

The other snakes its way across hilly grasslands and through the park-like stands of pine and fir atop Red Sleep Mountain.

Here there are ample opportunities to spot not only bison in the wild, but elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and bighorn sheep as well.

It takes at least two hours to complete the 19-mile drive. The road is one-way, graveled and beset by switchbacks and steep grades. We were told it was OK to get out of our vehicle, but warned to stay by the car and to watch for rattlesnakes.

We had covered only about five miles of the drive, spotting a number of

pronghorns along the way, when we were caught in the "buffalo jam."

A willow-choked creek on one side of the road blocked the band and they milled about not knowing which way to turn.

There were smaller cows, still suckling yearling calves, "spike bulls," those less than four-years-old with smooth clean horns, and a few mature animals, shading from a light brown at the hump to a dark brown, even black at the head and hind quarters.

It was late summer, near the end of the rutting season and a couple of young bulls began a shoving match as they tested their strength against the day when they might challenge the leader.

In 1962, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, I had photographed a similar herd from the back of a pick-up truck. A story going the rounds then was of a couple in a Volkswagen that had somehow enraged a bull. The animal had

Please see BISON on T2



PHOTOGRAPHY / GERALD SILVER

They're 142 years late, but . . .

If it weren't for a couple of photographers and a small crowd lining the road wearing modern clothing, the reenactment of a wagon train entering the valley Friday would be a perfect image of pioneer days. Even with the modern annoyances, the folks at Pio-

neer Trail State Park near Emigration Canyon began the three-day holiday weekend by giving spectators a good view of pioneer-style clothing and transportation. Demonstrations of pioneer crafts will continue at the park through July 24 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Pioneer Day events continue all weekend. Events scheduled on July 24 include the Sunrise Service, 7 a.m., Tabernacle, Temple Square; the Days of '47 Parade, 9 a.m., downtown Salt Lake City; and the Neighbor Fair, 11 a.m., Liberty Park. *22 July 1989*

